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AUTHOR Brandt, Ronald S.
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ABSTRACT

The following recommendations on curriculum development are presented: (1) Federally sponsored research and development in education has had a beneficial effect on American schools, and promises to be even more effective if responsible, long-term policies can be established and followed; (2) Freedom of choice and cultural diversity can be safeguarded by providing high-quality alternatives within and among schools, rather than by curtailing curriculum development sponsored by the federal government; (3) The National Institute of Education should prepare a model set of goals for elementary and secondary education that clarify what students should know and be able to do; (4) Curriculum should be developed through partnership arrangements between school districts and development agencies (such as laboratories and centers); (5) Curriculum produced by regional laboratories and other development centers should be field tested and evaluated by a separate, independent agency; (6) Information about all curriculum materials developed with federal support (and other materials which meet stringent criteria) should be disseminated through a single information service that is readily and continuously accessible by school districts; (7) Curriculum developers should provide "implementation scales" that can be used to assess the adequacy of local implementation. (Author/DS)

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Position Paper on Federal Curriculum Development

Ronald S. Brandt
Lincoln Public Schools
Lincoln, Nebraska

A paper prepared for the
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Ronald Brandt has been Associate Superintendent for Instruction of the Lincoln (Nebraska) Public Schools for six years. He spent two years as Director of Staff Development for the Minneapolis (Minnesota) Public Schools and was Program Coordinator for the Upper Midwest Regional Education Laboratory when it was first established (1966-68). He has been a teacher and junior high school principal, and served with a University of Wisconsin project in Northern Nigeria. He is currently a member of the publications committee of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

ABSTRACT

As a result of his experiences as curriculum administrator for a medium-sized midwestern school district, the author recommends:

1. Federally sponsored research and development in education has had a beneficial effect on American schools, and promises to be even more effective if responsible, long-term policies can be established and followed.

2. Freedom of choice and cultural diversity can be safeguarded by providing high-quality alternatives within and among schools, rather than by curtailing curriculum development sponsored by the federal government.

3. NIE should prepare a model set of goals for elementary and secondary education which clarify what students should know and be able to do. New curriculum should be designed to accomplish one or more of the established goals.

4. Curriculum should be developed through partnership arrangements between school districts and development agencies (such as laboratories and centers).

5. Curriculum produced by regional laboratories and other development centers should be field tested and evaluated by a separate, independent agency.

6. Information about all curriculum materials developed with federal support (and other materials which meet stringent criteria) should be disseminated through a single information service which is readily and continuously accessible by school districts.

7. Curriculum developers should provide "implementation scales" which can be used to assess the adequacy of local implementation.

POSITION PAPER ON FEDERAL CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

I am Associate Superintendent for Instruction for the Lincoln Public Schools, a medium-sized (28,000) midwestern district, with a small (4%) enrollment of minority students.

In the six years I have been Associate Superintendent, our district has been actively involved with federally sponsored curriculum development. Examples of programs taught here include Science: A Process Approach, Geography in an Urban Age, Exploring Childhood, Man: A Course of Study, Elements of Mathematics, American Political Behavior, World of Construction, Developing Mathematical Processes, and many others. About half of our elementary schools use the model of school organization known as Individually Guided Education developed by the University of Wisconsin Research and Development Center. In addition, we have had several locally designed projects funded by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and other federal sources, including one project which was nationally validated.

Before coming to Lincoln, I was a staff member of the Upper Midwest Regional Educational Laboratory when it was first established, and then Director of Staff Development for the Minneapolis Public Schools from 1968 to 1970. The comments that follow are based on these experiences.

NEED

Federally sponsored research and development in education has had a beneficial effect on American schools, and promises to be even more

effective if responsible, long-term policies can be established and followed.

I believe that well-planned curriculum is necessary for students to learn efficiently and well, and that development of quality materials takes time, talent and money. Most local school districts lack resources to do the job properly.

Of course, not all federal efforts to improve curriculum during the last decade were equally wise and beneficial. But the movement has a very brief history, and those involved can learn from any mistakes which were made. The review currently underway provides an opportunity to assess what has been accomplished and to establish future direction. I believe that the program of NIE should include at least 50% for curriculum development.

DIVERSITY

Freedom of choice and cultural diversity can be safeguarded by providing high-quality alternatives within and among schools, rather than by curtailing curriculum development sponsored by the federal government.

Some critics of federal curriculum development say they are concerned about imposition of a "national curriculum" on local school districts. Of course, Americans value diversity and choice, and these values should be reflected in our public schools. But many curriculum choices in the past were made by state legislatures and local school boards who imposed a single curriculum on all children under their jurisdiction.

We may be moving away from that by providing more local alternatives. For example, schools in our district follow the recommendations of a congressional review group[1] that parents opposed to Man: A Course of Study may have a different social studies curriculum for their children. And schools which offer both continuous progress mathematics courses (such as Individually Prescribed Instruction) and group-paced programs often involve parents in deciding which type of instruction is best for their child.

What I am suggesting is that NIE design curriculum on the assumption that some choices should be made at the individual school - according to characteristics of the student and personal and professional preferences of teachers and parents. If so, federal sponsorship of curriculum development may encourage, rather than inhibit, diversity.

GOALS

NIE should prepare a model set of goals for elementary and secondary education which clarify what students should know and be able to do. New curriculum should be designed to accomplish one or more of the established goals.

One thing which seems missing from federal efforts to improve education is an understanding about the purposes and expected outcomes of elementary and secondary schooling. Local districts are increasingly aware that they need goals for students - descriptions of what students are expected to know and be able to do as a result of their school experiences.

Our local goal statement has been revised several times, and is currently under reconsideration again. For example, we think our goals should reflect the findings of Northcott's study of Adult Performance Level[2]. Each revision has been an improvement, but there is still too little relationship between the goals and the curriculum by which we profess to achieve them.

If local school systems need goals which are justifiable and understandable, the agencies which develop curriculum must need them too. Of course, each curriculum developed in the past had its own objectives, bu[illegible] - so far as I know - they were not related to a broader statement of aims.

National Assessment of Educational Progress has developed excellent goal statements. Their goals are the product of many hours of thoughtful deliberation by representative educators, specialists and citizens. Unfortunately, although each set of goals is well written, NAEP has no comprehensive statement either.

A model set of goals for students in elementary and secondary schools might help provide a sense of direction for the Congress and for others who make decisions about nationally funded curriculum. The goals should obviously not be imposed on states or local school districts, but many would adopt them voluntarily if they were thoughtfully written and helpful.

If goals are sufficiently broad and general, nearly any program can be shown to relate to them in some way. But I am not asking for rationalization. Instead I am suggesting establishment of goals as the <u>first</u> step in a process which eventually results in curriculum specifically designed to accomplish them.

RELATIONSHIPS

Curriculum should be developed through partnership arrangements between school districts and development agencies (such as laboratories and centers).

The "proposal" approach is a useful way both to distribute federal funds and to assure accountability for their use. However, federal efforts to improve curriculum should not rely exclusively on written proposals.

I might elaborate by citing two ideas of current interest. One is the model of "mastery learning" advocated by Bloom and Block.[3] Either their claims are greatly exaggerated, or American education is neglecting an approach with considerable promise. Under current conditions our district might prepare a proposal for funding under Title IV, ESEA. But we are not so interested in trying the idea "on our own" as we are in working with agencies which have adequate funds and qualified staff to give the idea a fair trial.

My district is also interested in following the ideas of Taba[4] about design of cumulative, sequential curriculum. In November I will meet with representatives from four other districts (New York to California) to discuss formation of a consortium for curriculum development. If we are successful, our first product will be a curriculum in written communication. We are not sure, however, that five school districts have sufficient resources to accomplish what we desire to do.

Perhaps these examples illustrate the need for a new relationship between school districts and development agencies.

EVALUATION

Curriculum produced by regional laboratories and other development centers should be field tested and evaluated by a separate, independent agency.

Another lesson which has been learned from the first round of curriculum development is that evaluation - at least summative evaluation -should be conducted separately from development. I am sure that evaluators employed by regional laboratories intend to be objective, but they find it difficult to refrain from advocacy. (The General Accounting Office[5] report on Man: A Course of Study makes that point.)

At a given stage of development, curriculum materials should be submitted to a totally independent agency which supervises their tryout under controlled conditions and reports the results. Such an agency might also check the materials for such social considerations as sexual and cultural equity.

Independent evaluation of curriculum materials is one of the most important curriculum services the national government can provide. One of the few comparable services currently available is that provided by Educational Products Information Exchange.[6] Their reports, however, ordinarily evaluate only selected items - and then only by analysis rather than actual use with students. An independent agency (or a network of such agencies if necessary to provent monopoly of opinion) could evaluate all materials developed with federal funds and could invite voluntary participation by other developers. The result of such an approach would be authentic "learner verification" as has been called for by EPIE.

DISSEMINATION

Information about all curriculum materials developed with federal support (and other materials which meet stringent criteria) should be disseminated through a single information service which is readily and continuously accessible by school districts.

A related service which should be provided in connection with curriculum development and evaluation is a single source of information about available curriculum materials. Products entered in the system would not be restricted to those developed with federal funds, but all those submitted would be subject to the same rigorous evaluation standards. Partial services of this sort are now, or have been, available[7] but a single comprehensive service does not exist. The purpose of such a service should be not so much to "sell" local educators as to provide unbiased information about the suitability of various programs for particular applications.

IMPLEMENTATION

Curriculum developers should provide "implementation scales" which can be used to assess the adequacy of local implementation.

Perhaps the weakest part of federal curriculum development has been implementation by local school districts. Poorly trained or incompetent teachers are unable to use high quality programs well. In fact, they sometimes teach more adequately with conventional materials than with complicated, sophisticated ones. But there are many competent teachers who can be trained to use new programs. School districts have found they must provide staff development, as well as

other support for implementation (storage of materials, consultant service, extra preparation time) or the best programs will fail.

Curriculum developers should provide suitable implementation criteria which specify, for example, what elements of the program are essential and which are subject to local option or adaptation. Other ways developers can assist with implementation include thorough training of local leaders (who in turn train staff members in their district) and provision of funds (if possible) to assist local districts with the added costs of extensive staff training.

CONCLUSION

Establishment of the National Institute of Education has great potential for improvement of elementary and secondary education in the United States. Few problems are more important to our country than raising the quality of education, because solution of other problems will surely depend upon the capability of future generations. Preparation of better curriculum will not by itself improve education. However, combined with basic research, teacher education and other efforts, it will help.

[1]Science Curriculum Review Group of the Committee on Science and Technology of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1975.

[2]Norvell Northcott, Adult Performance Level (Austin: University of Texas, 1975).

[3]Benjamin S. Bloom, "Learning for Mastery," Evaluation Comment, 1 (2), 1968.
James H. Block, ed., Schools, Society, and Mastery Learning (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974).

[4]Explained in Sydelle D. Ehrenberg, "The Case for Structure," Educational Leadership, October 1976, 45-49.

[5]Comptroller General of the United States, Administration of the Science Education Project "Man: A Course of Study," October 1975.

[6]Educational Products Information Exchange Institute, 463 West St., New York, N.Y. 10014

[7]Such as the Far West Regional Laboratory's ALERT Sourcebook.